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A Case of Dynamite

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OFFICIALS CONCERNED with national security have been handling the case of Lt. Col. Michael Goleniewski as though they were juggling a case of dynamite—which they are, all but literally. The Goleniewski business could explode in any of several ways, none of which is nice to contemplate.

Goleniewski [which is not his real name] is identified as a former high official of the soviet security agency KGB who defected to West Germany in 1961. Since then he has given information to the central intelligence agency, information whose explosive power, according to reports, would make nitroglycerin look like wet sawdust. Goleniewski is reported to have named 19 soviet agents now on United States government payrolls or in sensitive scientific posts, with free access to classified information.

Four of the KGB agents, he says, are working for the CIA itself; 12 are in the state department—and three of them are at the embassy-counselor level.

The New York Journal-American reports that the CIA tried to keep Goleniewski's story so tightly under wraps that not even Congress would know about it. If so, the attempt failed. Goleniewski is to testify in secret before the Senate internal security subcommittee within a few days.

A double agent is not the most trustworthy source, but Goleniewski's story may well be true. The United States and the Soviet Union are constantly engaged in planting, or trying to plant, agents inside each other's government or intelligence system. The United States has succeeded in the past [as the Oleg Penkovsky case showed], and it is logical to assume that the soviets have had their successes, too.

Still, a dramatic revelation that 19 traitors at a time had managed to penetrate sensitive spots would be a frightening and infuriating jolt to most Americans. It would bring to a new low the prestige of the state department and the CIA and generally weaken public confidence in the government.

So the eagerness of security officials to keep this case buttoned up is understandable—but that easy way out is the wrong one. If the government's security apparatus has failed this badly, the public will need every assurance it can get that the failure has been remedied, and that will require frank and detailed information on all aspects of the case.